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...and its limits

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The Imperial Imagination of Russians

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Among Soviet historians it has become a kind of truism that the Soviet Union was in a permanent state of contradictions and that Soviet society adopted to these contradictions with a variety of survival mechanisms that ranged from ignoring contradictions to circumventing their challenges. One of the most significant contradictions was the tension between the Soviet Union's self-declared anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism and the fact that it asserted its own imperial and colonial structures, especially in the post-WW II period. Many more qualified people have written on this and debated which of the two elements should be considered primary or how one should characterize the resulting entity. I shall try to address a different question here: What does and did empire mean to Russians, especially vis-à-vis Ukraine?

One of the glaring questions of the war in Ukraine is not only why Putin is so desperate to want to return to a situation in which Ukraine is subordinate to Great Russian interests, but why he feels so confident that he can sell this idea to his subjects and get their support for a military ›special operation‹ (as it is official labelled in Russia) that he knew was going to trigger sanctions at the very least. Putin thinks that a lust for empire – or maybe a need for empire – is something he and his subjects share. While in 2014 Russia celebrated the annexation of the Crimea with

enthusiastic Krym – Nash (the Crimea is ours) cries, this time it seems that empire has its limits in the Russian emotional universe, even though it is by no means absent.

First, one has to clarify that few Russians would condone the term ›empire‹ or ›imperial‹. The anti-imperial doctrines of Soviet times were effective enough to make these terms unacceptable to post-Soviet ears. It is, however, a different matter, if one delves into the implications of empire such as geographic security concerns, unrestricted travel, linguistic dominance and economic ties. And it is a completely different question if it concerns the fate of Russian compatriots or those who are perceived as such. Most Russians would condone and support Russian concerns in this area without much thought as to what extent colonial and imperial ties are established by such Russian interests, as they broadly did in Soviet times. As is so often the case with the dominant nationality in a multi-ethnic state or multi-ethnic empire, the spoils of dominance are hardly perceived as such. They are taken for granted as facts of life, assumed to be based on mutual agreement, even if there are open displays of resistance from other subjects of the empire. Nowhere was this assumption truer than in the Russian-Ukrainian relationship during Soviet times: Ukraine, where so many people spoke Russian as their first and only language; Ukraine, which sponsored more Soviet officials than any other nation bar the Russians themselves; Ukraine, whose capital was Kiev, to where Russians commonly trace their political history – Ukraine was generally perceived as different only in terms of food and folklore. And even here the differences were often stylistic.

This is the view on Ukraine that is lodged in Putin's head. Before he appeared in the upper echelons of power in 1999, travel between Ukraine and Russia by train was still possible without a passport. Kiev seemed like a poorer sister to Moscow, where the first signs of Russian-generated wealth were only about to become visible. During Putin's youthful socialization in the 1960s and 1970s the border was even more fluid and less perceptible. Large swathes of the eastern side of Ukraine with their multi-ethnic

population of coal minors, brought in from across the entire Soviet Union during the industrial drive of the 1930s, would have predominantly identified as Soviet above anything else. Kyiv was (and indeed is) a predominantly Russian-speaking city. I have no information when and how frequently Putin went to Ukraine in Soviet times, but he is very unlikely to have encountered much that would have suggested anything other than a ›joyful union‹, which was how Soviet textbooks characterized the relationship between republics.

Indeed, you had to be right in the middle of things in order to know how brutally and swiftly any kind of assertion of a non-sanctioned Ukrainian-ness was put down and persecuted. Young lovers of Taras Shevchenko knew that if they dared to assemble under his monument in Kyiv on his birthday, they would be arrested, despite the fact that the neighbouring university and a major Kyiv avenue carried his name. Those who thought that reading and quoting the poem ›Love Ukraine‹ by Volodymyr Sosiura was permitted, soon learned the opposite. Students who considered it fun to play as Ukrainian Cossacks in other places in Ukraine had a similar fate (the archives are full of such instances). Putin probably did not know during his time at the KGB that the absolute vast majority of the resources of the Ukrainian KGB went into the surveillance and oppression of Ukrainian nationalists. Even though Lviv was a popular tourist destination in Soviet times, few people would have been confronted with the long legacy of the struggle for Ukrainian independence there. Russians enjoyed going to Tallinn, Riga and Lviv for an experience of going to ›little Europe‹. Very few of them would have noted the implications of this difference in style which they found so charming. Sometimes people who were already outside the Soviet canon became aware that on the edge of the Soviet empire the mood was anti-Soviet and that this anti-Sovietness carried a rejection of Russian dominance. But such observations stayed very much in the underground or at best appeared in kitchen table conversations.

And there was much to make Russians assume that Ukrainians were willing partners in the Soviet game. No other nationality

bar Russians themselves sponsored more party and state officials. Ukrainians, meaning those who identified as Ukrainian in their Soviet internal passports, were well represented in the sphere of Soviet culture, literature and art. Their work was well-respected as long as it observed the parameters of the Soviet canon. There were jokes and stereotypes about khokhly (a derogative term for Ukrainians, implying peasant-backwardness), but, unlike being Jewish, there was no disadvantage to being Ukrainian as long as you accepted Sovietness.

When the differences and calls for independence became louder and less easy to overlook, it was at a time when Russians by large were pushing in the same centrifugal direction. During Perestroika the crescendo of national voices was not confined to Ukraine, but engulfed almost all the Soviet republics. But nationalism carried less an anti-Russian element than an anti-Soviet element – or, in some cases, a pro-Soviet reform element. The Russians were on the same page. They too at that time supported changes to Soviet reality – and increasingly the abolition of this Soviet reality. They often supported the republic's national movements, because it seemed that national freedom was part of the freedoms they craved for themselves. An often-forgotten fact of the late 1980s is that then there was a sizable Russian nationalism which believed that Russia would be better off without the pesky republics. And in Ukraine it is certainly true that at least some of the votes for independence in the 1991 referendum, which saw 92 % of Ukrainians vote for independence with a turn-out of 89 %, were motivated by a belief that freedom was better achieved without the strain of tying oneself to Russia, which was believed not to be able to escape its Soviet heritage. Yet many people, especially in the Eastern and central provinces of Ukraine, widely assumed that the two countries would step into this brave new world of post-socialism while, not as one, yet together, and in the same direction. This was very different to the Baltic states who made it clear that they considered their independence a necessary precondition to rejoin Western Europe. And this was very different to the Central Asian states which were considered economic

basket cases. Or the Transcaucasian states, even though some of these assumptions also applied to Georgia and Armenia as part of the Orthodox axis.

The early 1990s consensus on national self-determination of the Soviet republics rested hence on a number of assumptions, misperceptions and emotional factors, which did not stand up well to the times that followed. Putin in his historical deliberations writes himself out of the Perestroika period, but he was the closest aid to one of its main proponents, St. Petersburg mayor Anatolii Sobchak. At least politically, if not personally, he supported the policies of the time, which had devolution written large on their banner. Yet he frequently professes his personal as well as collective pain over the ›break-up of the Russian world‹, of which he considers Ukraine an unquestionable part. This contradiction is the result of a wide-spread myopia in the 1990s of what separate statehoods of the republics would really entail. Rationally it was thought through – scholars like Stephen Kotkin have remarked on the remarkably unviolent break-up of the Soviet Union – but emotionally it was a half-baked thing. De facto many Russians were not ready to let go of what they considered part of their identity. And for no other place was this truer than for the Crimea, where they had collected their happy summer memories, and for Kyiv, which they considered a pillar of their statehood and spirituality. This unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people is so self-understood by Putin that he invokes again and again his conviction that deep down ›the West‹ also knows that Russia could never let go of Kyiv/Ukraine and that he is bringing back together what belongs together, akin to what Germany did in 1990. He clearly believes that this is how the majority of his compatriots think – including the Russian speakers in Ukraine.

Yet this is where Putin, despite (or precisely because of) sitting at the centre of power for so long, betrays himself as dangerously and astonishingly out of touch. In a latest, very revealing pronouncement by RIA on the war (which was swiftly removed again, because it prematurely declared victory) the fear that any

delay to action would irreparably cement the division of the Russian people is repeated several times. If we do not act now, the separation of the Russian people will be permanent, it reads. But the process of irreversibility has long begun, even if one accepts the questionable premise that Ukrainians are a minor branch of Russianness. Putin has not been to Russia's Western neighbour since 2013. Even before he would have come with his presidential entourage and could hardly have gotten a sense how the country found its identity, especially among the young generation. He has no idea how anybody younger than forty has been socialized in an independent Ukraine. Since he is convinced that the Orange Revolution and Maidan were CIA creations, he cannot understand the authenticity of their unifying force. He does not want to see that his very own politics, both internally and externally, alienated Ukrainians of all ages. And he is not completely alone in his assessment. Many Russians have missed the real significance of what has taken place in Ukraine in the last thirty years: the creation of a civic state commanding fierce loyalty from its inhabitants across the linguistic divide, which never really was a divide since so many Ukrainians are fully bilingual.

Since 2014 Russian propaganda has managed to instill a true fear of Ukraine and Ukrainians among many Russians. While in Soviet times mobility across the republics was high and encounters between Ukrainians and Russians frequent (not least during summer holidays in the Crimea), in the post-Soviet world, open now to Russians and Ukrainians, they somehow see less of each other. When a few of my Muscovite friends had to travel to Kiev in 2018 for an American visa application, they were genuinely scared. And then pleasantly surprised when their trip was nice and pleasant and not at all marred by hostility towards Russian speakers. Yet one should not underestimate how many Russians, like Putin, have not been to Ukraine for a long time and how fertile the ground on which horror stories of repression – and lately genocide – in the Donbas is. The sense of being persecuted and under threat sits easily with notions of greatness and superiority (and nowhere is this better played out than in the Russian

indignation about doping charges in the Olympic arena). The imperial imagination of brotherhood has turned into the imperial imagination of fratricide, even among people who are educated and who go to Cyprus for their summer holidays. They might not endorse war just as they would not endorse imperialism, but they also do not think that Ukrainians should behave as they please. The emotional process of divesting empire is still fully ongoing. Russia will struggle with this war mentally and emotionally for a long time no matter if Putin reaches his goal of ›unifying the Russian and Ukrainian people‹ or not. But maybe it will also be the event that ushers in the end of the post-imperial trauma.